

route. Costco and Circuit City's Web sites, for example, offered slightly better selection than their traditional stores, our respondents told us. One advantage of dealing with a retailer that has both: You can buy the system online, then pick it up almost immediately from the store (as did 61 percent of our respondents who bought computers on Circuit City's Web site). If you're dissatisfied with your computer, you can also return it to the store rather than having to ship it.

SAY GOODBYE TO REBATES

Some manufacturers are cutting back their rebate programs. Sony, for example, has already shrunk the percentage of Vaio systems with mail-in rebate offers from 20 percent to 5 percent. Dell announced plans to reduce the rebates and promotions on all its product lines by 70 percent within the next 12 to 18 months.

That's fine by us. The decline of rebates doesn't mean that prices will rise. Plus, the complexity and variety of special offers have made it difficult to know exactly what you can get for your money,

with deals changing daily and sometimes more often. Now it should be easier to recognize a good price when you see one.

CONSIDER YOUR CONFIGURATION

For a budget desktop or laptop, 512MB of RAM should be sufficient unless you're planning to run any version of Vista. In that case, get 1GB of RAM. Workhorse desktops and laptops require enough power to run video editing, 3D games, and other intensive applications, so plan on 1GB of RAM.

A budget desktop should cost about \$500 without a monitor and under \$800 with a 17-inch LCD. It should have a 160GB hard drive, integrated video, and a DVD burner. Workhorse users will spend about \$1,500 for a desktop with a 250GB hard drive, 256MB of dedicated video RAM, a DVD burner and a DVD-ROM drive, and a 19-inch monitor.

Less than \$1,000 will get you a budget laptop with a 60GB hard drive, a CD-RW/DVD combo drive, integrated video, and a 14.1- or 15.4-inch screen. Laptops in this category generally weigh 5 to 7

dollars&sense

WHEN EXTENDED COVERAGE IS A WASTE OF CASH

You've chosen your computer, you're checking out, and, whether you're in line at a store or online at a Web site, now comes the inevitable question: Would you like an extended warranty with that?

For most types of computers, we think you can safely say no, thanks.

Extended coverage might come from the manufacturer, which provides additional time to repair defects and may also include services such as more comprehensive technical support, "rapid" response, and on-site repair visits. Your retailer might also sell its own version of extended coverage when you buy your system.

When it comes to repairs, CONSUMER REPORTS has found that an extended warranty typically costs about the same as the average repair, meaning you're better off paying to fix your system when and if it breaks instead of buying a warranty you may never use. You may already have extra coverage from a credit card, which generally adds a year to the original warranty.

As to that added technical support, a recent CONSUMER REPORTS survey found that

people received such support more efficiently on an as-needed basis from independent third-party providers, such as the local computer repair shop.

CR's take. While the majority of computer buyers can ignore the extra-coverage sales pitch, there are a few exceptions. We recommend an Apple extended warranty if you're buying one of the company's desktops or laptops. In part that's because Apple computers come with only 90 days of tech support. The extended warranty provides additional access to Apple's tech support, which has been highly rated by CONSUMER REPORTS readers. We would also recommend considering extra coverage for refurbished computers of any brand with less than a one-year warranty.

Note that extended warranties typically don't cover drops, coffee spills, and the like. If that's a concern, you may want to consider accidental damage protection. Unfortunately, you usually must buy an extended warranty first. For theft and fire damage, your homeowners insurance should apply, but ask your agent to make sure.



Laptops

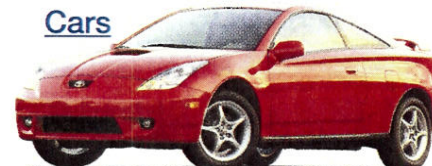
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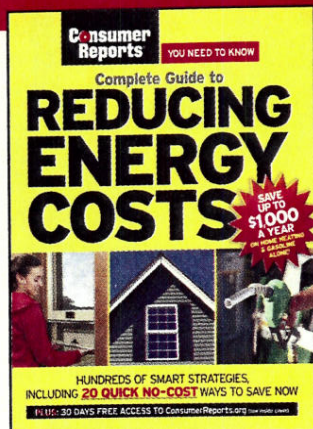
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pounds. For a laptop that can serve as a desktop replacement, get an 80GB hard drive, a DVD-RW drive, and 128MB of dedicated video RAM. You'll want a 14.1- to 15.4-inch widescreen display for portable use or a 17-inch one for desktop use. These systems are hefty, at 5 to 10

pounds, and will cost you \$1,000 to \$3,000.

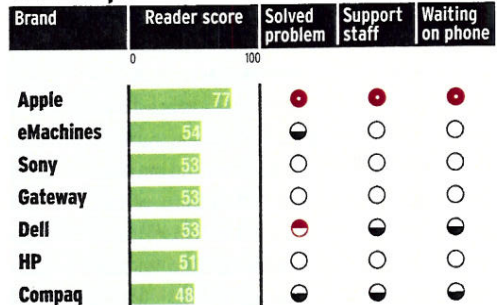
For a system you can easily tote, try a slim-and-light laptop with 512MB of RAM, a 60GB hard drive, a CD-RW/DVD combo drive, integrated video, and a carry weight of less than 5 pounds. You can get it for \$1,000 to \$2,000.

Tech support Who's most helpful when the chips are down.

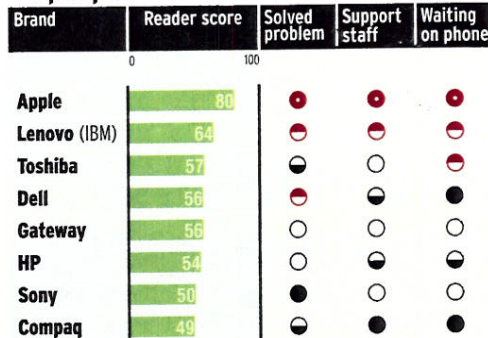
The Consumer Reports National Research Center surveyed 12,319 CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers on their most recent experiences with manufacturers' technical support. The survey covered January 2005 through June 2006.

The charts at right give the specifics. If everyone was completely satisfied, the reader score would be 100; 80 would mean respondents were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of less than 7 points for desktops are not meaningful, less than 6 points for laptops. Solved problem indicates how many people said that the manufacturer resolved their problem. Support staff is based primarily on how knowledgeable the phone reps seemed and how clearly they communicated. Waiting on phone refers to time waiting and other phone problems. Because of methodology differences, the two charts are not directly comparable.

Desktops



Laptops

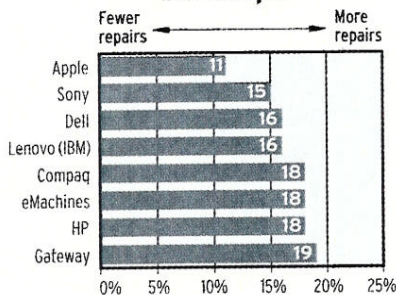


Brand repair history Readers report on 127,800 computers.

These graphs show the percentage of the following brands of computers bought between 2002 and 2006 that have ever been repaired or had a serious problem. Differences of less than 4 points are not mean-

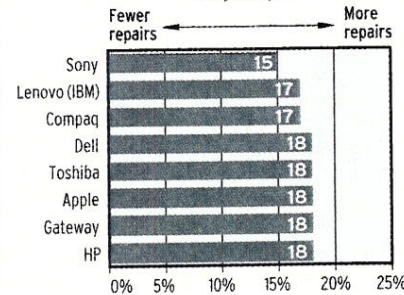
ingful for desktops, less than 3 points for laptops. Models within a brand may vary, and changes in design or manufacture may affect reliability. Still, choosing a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds.

Desktops



Data are based on more than 77,700 responses to our Annual Product Reliability Survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Data have been adjusted to eliminate differences solely linked to the age and the usage of the product.

Laptops



Data are based on more than 50,100 responses to our Annual Product Reliability Survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Data have been adjusted to eliminate differences solely linked to the age and the usage of the product.

CR Quick Recommendations

Budget desktop computers tend to have fewer features, weak performance in 3D games, and mediocre speakers. Still, a budget model can handle most typical computing chores. Consider paying extra for a workhorse only if you want more power to play 3D games or edit videos.

The **Ratings** rank desktop computers by test results and features. **Quick Picks** also takes into account value, brand reliability, and tech support, which may matter more to some users.

QUICK PICKS

Best basic desktops:

- 2 Compaq** \$470
3 HP \$490

Both of these desktop models offer a well-rounded feature set, very good speed, and excellent expandability at a budget price. However, tech support and reliability have been undistinguished for both brands,

according to our surveys. The Compaq uses Intel chips; the HP is AMD-based.

If you need more power:

- 10 Dell** \$1,020, CR Best Buy

The Gateway combines a full feature list and very good performance with a reasonable price. The Dell offers the most bang for the buck, especially because it includes a 17-inch monitor. However, both Gateway and Dell's tech support and reliability have been undistinguished.

If reliability and tech support are of paramount importance:

- 11 Apple \$1,200**

Apple's desktops have proven very reliable, and its tech support has been superior. The Mac operating system is also less vulnerable than Windows to viruses and other malware. Apple recently began equipping this Mac with a Core 2 Duo processor.

NEW TESTS & SCORING

As with laptops in our September issue, we've updated the way we test desktops. Here's a rundown of some of the changes; for more details, see [Guide to the Ratings](#), below. **Features**, a new series of tests, is the heaviest factor scored; it weighs hardware components such as memory-card slots, as well as included software. **Ergonomics** replaces the former heading called Convenience and measures various design factors. The Multimedia tests are now referred to as **3D gaming**. Because of these changes, overall scores are calculated differently and are now generally lower than prior Ratings, which aren't comparable. Despite the lower scores, any one of these computer models has enough speed and power for basic productivity tasks, as well as for jobs such as digital photo editing and Web browsing.

Ratings

- **Availability** Most models at stores through December 2006.



3 HP



11 Apple

Within types, in performance order. Blue key numbers indicate Quick Picks. Models with equal scores are listed alphabetically.

	Brand & model	Processor	Video adapter	Price	Overall score	Test results	Features
Key number							Ergonomics Speed 3D gaming Speakers Expansion Memory-card slot FireWire port DVI display port S-video out Digital audio out Remote control
					0 100 P F G VG E		
	BUDGET MODELS Have 512MB of RAM, a 160GB hard drive, a DVD burner, and stereo speakers.						
1	Compaq Presario SR1900Z	Sempron 3400+	Nvidia 6150	\$480	56		
2	Compaq Presario SR1930T	Celeron D 352	ATI 200	470	56		
3	HP Pavilion a1400e	Sempron 3400+	Nvidia 6150	490	56		
4	HP Pavilion a1400y	Celeron D 356	ATI 200	510	54		
5	eMachines T3508	Celeron D 356	ATI 200	430	52		
6	Apple Mac Mini [1] [2] [3]	1.5GHz Core Solo	Intel 950	680	40		
	WORKHORSE MODELS Have 1GB of RAM, a 250GB hard drive, a DVD burner, a DVD-ROM drive, and speakers with a subwoofer.						
7	Gateway FX510S	Pentium D 930	128MB Nvidia 6600	1,255	72		
8	HP Pavilion d4500e	Athlon 64 X2 4600+	256MB ATI X1600	1,475	72		
9	Gateway DX310X	Pentium D 930	128MB Nvidia 6600	1,205	68		
10	Dell Dimension E510	Pentium D 930	256MB ATI X600	1,020	67		
11	Apple iMac 17" [2] [4]	1.83GHz Core Duo	128MB ATI X1600	1,200	64		

^[1] 60GB hard drive. ^[2] Integrated speakers. ^[3] CD-RW/DVD combo drive. ^[4] Includes only DVD burner.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score covers features, ergonomics, speed, and other factors. **Features** includes important items such as audio, video, and communications connections, storage devices, and software. **Ergonomics** evaluates keyboard, mouse, case design, and noise. **Speed** measures performance while running office productivity and content creation

applications. **3D gaming** covers performance while playing 3D-intensive games. **Speakers** looks at speaker quality, including fidelity, bass response, and loudness. **Expansion** is expandability and ease of upgrades. **Price** is approximate retail and without a display, except for the Dell (10) and Apple iMac (11), which include a 17-inch LCD.

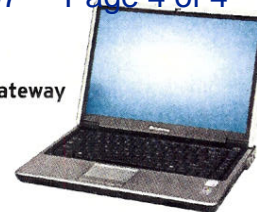
Ratings

laptops

• **Availability** Most models at stores through December 2006.

Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor

1 Gateway



Within types, in performance order. **Blue** key numbers indicate Quick Picks. Models with equal scores are listed alphabetically.

Brand & model	Processor	Video adapter	Price	Overall score	Test results	Features
Similar models, in small type, comparable to tested model.						
Key number					Ergonomics Display Multimedia features Speed Speakers Battery life (hr.) Weight (lb.) Memory-card slot FireWire port Remote control Built-in webcam Built-in microphone Fingerprint reader	
14.1-INCH BUDGET MODELS Have 512MB of RAM, a 60GB to 80GB hard drive, and a CD-RW/DVD combo drive.						
1 Gateway NX260X ¹	Core Duo T2050	Intel 950	\$1,025	63	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 5½ 5.8 ● ●	
2 Toshiba Satellite M100	Core Duo T2300E	Intel 950	935	63	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 3¾ 5.4 ● ●	●
3 Dell Inspiron E1405	Core Duo T2300E	Intel 950	830	57	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 5½ 5.4 ● ●	
4 HP Pavilion dv2000t Compaq Presario V3000T	Core Duo T2050	Intel 950	940	55	○ ○ ● ● ○ 3¾ 5.5 ● ● ● ●	
5 HP Pavilion dv2000z Compaq Presario V3000Z	Turion 64 X2 TL-52	Nvidia 6150	1,010	53	○ ○ ● ● ○ 2¾ 5.5 ● ● ● ●	
15.4-INCH BUDGET MODELS Same as above, but with a larger screen.						
6 Lenovo 3000 N100 ²	Core Duo T2300	Intel 950	950	53	○ ○ ○ ● ● 3½ 6.1 ● ●	● ●
7 Dell Inspiron B130 ²	Pentium M 735	Intel 900	560	51	○ ○ ○ ● ● 2 6.6	
8 Toshiba Satellite A100	Celeron M 420	ATI 200M	970	51	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 1¼ 5.8	
15.4-INCH WORKHORSE MODELS Have 1GB of RAM, an 80GB to 120GB hard drive, and a DVD burner.						
9 Apple Macbook Pro 15" ²	2.0GHz Core Duo	128MB ATI X1600	2,100	63	○ ● ● ● ● 3¾ 5.5 ● ● ● ●	
10 Gateway NX560XL	Core Duo T2500	128MB ATI X1400	1,510	59	○ ○ ○ ● ● 4 6.5 ● ●	●
11 Dell Inspiron E1505	Core Duo T2400	128MB ATI X1300	1,060	58	○ ○ ● ● ○ 2½ 6.6 ● ● ●	
12 HP Pavilion dv5000t Compaq Presario V5000T	Core Duo T2400	128MB Nvidia 7400	1,060	58	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 3 6.8 ● ●	
13 Lenovo Thinkpad Z61m ²	Core Duo T2500	128MB ATI X1400	1,665	58	○ ● ● ● ● 2¾ 7.0 ● ● ● ●	●
14 Sony VAIO VGN-FE590G VGN-FE690	Core Duo T2400	Intel 950	1,370	57	○ ● ○ ● ● 3 6.2 ● ● ● ●	
15 HP Pavilion dv6000z Compaq Presario V6000Z	Turion 64 X2 TL-52	256MB Nvidia 7200	1,060	55	○ ● ● ● ○ 2¾ 6.5 ● ● ● ●	
16 HP Pavilion dv5000z Compaq Presario V5000Z	Turion 64 ML-37	ATI 200M	955	53	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 2¾ 6.7 ● ●	
17-INCH WORKHORSE MODELS Same as above, but with a larger screen that makes these especially suitable as desktop replacements.						
17 Apple Macbook Pro 17" ²	2.16GHz Core Duo	256MB ATI X1600	2,800	70	○ ● ● ● ● 4 6.7 ● ● ● ●	
18 Toshiba Qosmio G35-AV600 ³	Core Duo T2400	256MB Nvidia 7300	2,400	61	○ ● ● ● ● 2¾ 10.0 ● ● ● ●	●
19 Dell Inspiron E1705 ²	Core Duo T2400	256MB ATI X1400	1,365	60	○ ○ ● ● ○ 3½ 7.8 ● ● ●	
20 HP Pavilion dv8000t	Core Duo T2400	256MB Nvidia 7600	1,200	59	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 4¾ 8.2 ● ●	
21 Toshiba Satellite P100	Core Duo T2400	128MB Nvidia 7600	1,335	57	○ ○ ○ ● ○ 1¾ 7.4 ● ● ●	●
22 Gateway NX860X ²	Core Duo T2500	128MB Nvidia 7600	1,585	56	○ ○ ○ ● ● 2¾ 7.9 ● ●	
23 Averatec 7160-EC1	Turion 64 ML-32	ATI 200M	1,100	35	○ ○ ○ ● ● 2¾ 7.3 ● ●	
12.1- TO 13.3-INCH SLIM AND LIGHT MODELS Have 1GB of RAM, a 60GB to 80GB hard drive, and a CD-RW/DVD combo drive.						
24 Apple Macbook 13.3"	Core Duo 1.83GHz	Intel 950	1,200	62	○ ○ ● ● ● 4 5.1 ● ● ● ●	
25 Sony VAIO VGN-SZ140 13.3" VGN-SZ240	Core Duo T2400	Intel/Nvidia 7400	1,630	60	○ ● ● ● ● 3¾ 4.2 ● ● ● ●	
26 Gateway NX100X 12.1" ⁴	Core Solo U1400	Intel 950	1,400	50	○ ○ ○ ○ ● 2¾ 3.2 ● ●	
27 Toshiba Portege R200 12.1" ⁵	Pentium M 773	Intel 900	2,225	50	○ ○ ○ ○ ● 4 2.8 ● ●	● ●
28 Averatec 2260-EY1 12.1" ⁴	Turion 64 MT-32	Via DeltaChrome	1,000	43	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 2¾ 4.2 ● ●	

¹ 1GB RAM. ² Matte displays. ³ Has two 100GB hard drives. ⁴ DVD burner. ⁵ 512MB RAM.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ergonomics, display quality, multimedia features, and other factors. **Ergonomics** represents the ease of using the keyboard, touchpad, and switches, as well as case design. **Display** covers screen quality, including clarity, contrast, and viewing angle. **Multimedia features** include hardware (memory-card slots and AV connections), and software (multimedia playback and

editing programs). **Speed** measures performance while running office productivity and content creation applications. **Speakers** covers speaker fidelity, bass response, and loudness. **Battery life** is while running productivity applications. **Weight** includes optical drives and one battery (but no AC adapter). **Price** is approximate retail. All of the tested laptop models in the Ratings have Wi-Fi.